Macbeth

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, King James of Scotland became King of England. James almost immediately gave his patronage to Shakespeare's company, making them the King's Men. In many ways, *Macbeth* can be seen as a show of gratitude from Shakespeare to his new King and benefactor. For instance, King James actually traced his ancestry back to the real-life Banquo. Shakespeare's transformation of the Banquo in Holinshed's *Chronicles* who helped murder Duncan to the noble man in Macbeth who refused to help kill Duncan is therefore a kind of compliment given to King James' ancestor.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shakespeare's source for Macbeth was Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, though in writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare changed numerous details for dramatic and thematic reasons, and even for political reasons (see Related Historical Events). For instance, in Holinshed's version, Duncan was a weak and ineffectual King, and Banquo actually helped Macbeth commit the murder. Shakespeare's changes to the story emphasize Macbeth's fall from nobility to man ruled by ambition and destroyed by guilt.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Tragedy of Macbeth*
- **When Written:** 1606
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500 - 1660)
- **Genre:** Tragic drama
- **Setting:** Scotland and, briefly, England during the eleventh century
- **Climax:** Some argue that the murder of Banquo is the play's climax, based on the logic that it is at this point that Macbeth reaches the height of his power and things begin to fall apart from there. However, it is probably more accurate to say that the climax of the play is Macbeth's fight with Macduff, as it is at this moment that the threads of the play come together, the secret behind the prophecy becomes evident, and Macbeth's doom is sealed.

EXTRA CREDIT

Shakespeare or Not? There are some who believe Shakespeare wasn't educated enough to write the plays attributed to him. The most common anti-Shakespeare theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man because aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Yet the evidence supporting Shakespeare's authorship far outweighs any evidence against. So until further notice, Shakespeare is still the most influential writer in the English language.

PLOT SUMMARY

Norwegians, aided by Scottish rebels, have invaded Scotland. The Scots successfully defend their country and their beloved king, Duncan. One Scotsman in particular, Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, distinguishes himself in fighting off the invaders. After the battle, Macbeth and his friend Banquo come upon the weird sisters, three witches who prophesy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, and one day King. They further prophesy that Banquo's descendants will be kings. The men don't at first believe the witches, but then learn that the old Thane of Cawdor was actually a traitor helping the Norwegians, and that Duncan has rewarded Macbeth's bravery on the battlefield by making him Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth immediately fantasizes about murdering Duncan and becoming king, but pushes the thought away. Later that day, Duncan announces that his eldest son, Malcolm, will be heir to his throne. As Macbeth begins to succumb to his ambition, Duncan decides to spend the night in celebration at Macbeth's castle of Inverness.

Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband about the prophecy and Duncan's imminent arrival. She decides her husband is too kind to follow his ambitions, and vows to push him to murder Duncan and take the crown that very night. Macbeth at first resists his wife's plan, but his ambition and her constant questioning of his courage and manhood win him over. That night they murder Duncan and frame the men guarding Duncan's room. The next morning, Macduff, another Scottish thane, discovers Duncan dead and raises the alarm. Macbeth

and Lady Macbeth pretend to be shocked and outraged. Macbeth murders the guardsmen of Duncan's room to keep them silent, but says he did it out of a furious rage that they killed the king. Duncan's sons think they may be the next target, and flee. Macbeth is made king, and because they ran, Duncan's sons become the prime suspects in their father's murder.

Because he knows the witches' prophecy, Banquo is suspicious of Macbeth. And because of the prophecy that Banquo's line will reign as kings, Macbeth sees Banquo as a threat. Macbeth gives a feast, inviting many thanes, including Banquo. Macbeth hires two murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance as they ride to attend the feast. The men kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes. At the feast, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost, though no one else does. Macbeth's behavior and the death of Banquo make all the thanes suspicious. They begin to think of Macbeth as a tyrant. Macduff refuses to appear at the royal court at all, and goes to England to support Malcolm in his effort to raise an army against Macbeth.

Macbeth visits the three witches to learn more about his fate. They show him three apparitions who tell Macbeth to beware Macduff, but also that no "man born of woman" can defeat him and that he will rule until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane (a castle). Since all men are born of women and trees can't move, Macbeth takes this to mean he's invincible. Yet the witches also confirm the prophecy that Banquo's line will one day rule Scotland. To strengthen his hold on the crown, Macbeth sends men to Macduff's castle to murder Macduff's family. Meanwhile, in England, Macduff and Malcolm prepare to invade Scotland. When news comes to England of the murder of Macduff's family, Macduff, weeping, vows revenge.

While the English and Scottish under Malcolm march toward Dunsinane, Lady Macbeth begins sleepwalking and imagining blood on her hands that can't be washed off. Macbeth has become manic, cruel, and haughty—many of his men desert to Malcolm's side. In Birnam Wood, Malcolm and his generals devise a strategy to hide their numbers—they cut branches to hold up in front of them. As Macbeth prepares for the siege, Lady Macbeth dies, perhaps of suicide. Macbeth can barely feel anything anymore, and her death only makes him give a speech about the meaninglessness of life. Then Malcolm's forces appear looking like a forest marching toward the castle. Malcolm's forces quickly capture Dunsinane, but Macbeth himself fights on, mocking all who dare to face him as "men born of woman." But Macduff reveals that he was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb (a caesarean section). Macduff kills Macbeth, and Malcolm is crowned as King of Scotland.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Macbeth – Lady Macbeth's husband and a Scottish nobleman, the Thane of Glamis. He is made Thane of Cawdor for his bravery in battle, and becomes King of Scotland by murdering the previous King, Duncan. As Macbeth opens, Macbeth is one of the great noblemen in Scotland: valiant, loyal, and honorable. He's also ambitious, and while this ambition helps to make him the great lord he is, once he hears the weird sisters' prophecy Macbeth becomes so consumed by his desire for power that he becomes a tyrannical and violent monster who ultimately destroys himself. What's perhaps most interesting about Macbeth is that he senses the murder will lead to his own destruction even before he murders Duncan, yet his ambition is so great that he *still* goes through with it.

Lady Macbeth – Macbeth's wife. Unlike her husband, she has no reservations about murdering Duncan in order to make Macbeth King of Scotland. She believes that a true man takes what he wants, and whenever Macbeth objects to murdering Duncan on moral grounds, she questions his courage. Lady Macbeth assumes that she'll be able to murder Duncan and then quickly forget it once she's Queen of Scotland. But she discovers that guilt is not so easily avoided, and falls into madness and despair.

Banquo – A Scottish nobleman, general, and friend of Macbeth. He is also the father of Fleance. The weird sisters prophesy that while Banquo will never be King of Scotland, his descendants will one day sit on the throne. Banquo is as ambitious as Macbeth, but unlike Macbeth he resists putting his selfish ambition above his honor or the good of Scotland. Because he both knows the prophecy and is honorable, Banquo is both a threat to Macbeth and a living example of the noble path that Macbeth chose not to take. After Macbeth has Banquo murdered he is haunted by Banquo's ghost, which symbolizes Macbeth's terrible guilt at what he has become.

Macduff – A Scottish nobleman, and the Thane of Fife. His wife is Lady Macduff, and the two have babies and a young son. Macduff offers a contrast to Macbeth: a Scottish lord who, far from being ambitious, puts the welfare of Scotland even ahead of the welfare of his own family. Macduff suspects Macbeth from the beginning, and becomes one of the leaders of the rebellion. After Macbeth has Macduff's family murdered, Macduff's desire for vengeance becomes more personal and powerful.

King Duncan – The King of Scotland, and the father of Malcolm and Donalbain. Macbeth murders him to get the crown. Duncan is the model of a good, virtuous king who puts the welfare of the country above his own and seeks, like a gardener, to nurture and grow the kingdom that is his responsibility. Duncan is the living embodiment of the political and social order that Macbeth destroys.

Malcolm – The older of King Duncan's two sons, and Duncan's designated heir to the throne of Scotland. Early in the play, Malcolm is a weak and inexperienced leader, and he actually

flees Scotland in fear after his father is murdered. But Malcolm matures, and with the help of Macduff and an English army, Malcolm eventually overthrows Macbeth and retakes the throne, restoring the order that was destroyed when Duncan was murdered.

Weird Sisters – Three witches, whose prophecy helps push Macbeth's ambition over the edge, and convinces him to murder Duncan in order to become King. The witches' knowledge of future events clearly indicates that they have supernatural powers, and they also clearly enjoy using those powers to cause havoc and mayhem among mankind. But it is important to realize that the witches never compel anyone to do anything. Instead, they tell half-truths to lure men into giving into their own dark desires. It's left vague in Macbeth whether Macbeth would have become King of Scotland if he just sat back and did nothing. This vagueness seems to suggest that while the broad outlines of a person's fate might be predetermined, how the fate plays out is up to him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Fleance – Banquo's teenage son. Macbeth sees him as a threat because of the weird sisters' prophecy that Banquo's descendants will one day rule Scotland.

Lady Macduff – The wife of Macduff and the mother of Macduff's children (and the only female character of note in the play besides Lady Macbeth). She questions her husband's decision to leave his family behind when he goes to England to help Malcolm save Scotland from Macbeth.

Young Macduff – Macduff's son, still a child.

Lennox – A Scottish nobleman.

Ross – A Scottish nobleman.

Angus – A Scottish nobleman.

Donalbain – King Duncan's younger son and Malcolm's brother.

Murderers – Men hired by Macbeth to kill Banquo and Fleance.

Porter – The guardian of the gate at Macbeth's castle..

Hecate – The goddess of witchcraft.

Gentlewoman – Lady Macbeth's attendant.

Siward – A warlike English lord.

Young Siward – Siward's son.

King Edward – The King of England. He is so saintly his touch can cure the sick.

Captain – A captain in the Scottish Army.

Seyton – Macbeth's servant.

Old Man – An elderly fellow who sees some strange things happen the night Macbeth murders Duncan.

English Doctor – An English doctor.

Scottish Doctor – The doctor Macbeth assigns to cure Lady Macbeth of her madness.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

AMBITION

Macbeth is a play about ambition run amok. The weird sisters' prophecies spur both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to try to fulfill their ambitions, but the witches never *make* Macbeth or his wife do anything. Macbeth and his wife act on their own to fulfill their deepest desires. Macbeth, a good general and, by all accounts before the action of the play, a good man, allows his ambition to overwhelm him and becomes a murdering, paranoid maniac. Lady Macbeth, once she begins to put into actions the once-hidden thoughts of her mind, is crushed by guilt.

Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to be great and powerful, and sacrifice their morals to achieve that goal. By contrasting these two characters with others in the play, such as Banquo, Duncan, and Macduff, who also want to be great leaders but refuse to allow ambition to come before honor, Macbeth shows how naked ambition, freed from any sort of moral or social conscience, ultimately takes over every other characteristic of a person. Unchecked ambition, *Macbeth* suggests, can never be fulfilled, and therefore quickly grows into a monster that will destroy anyone who gives into it.

FATE

From the moment the weird sisters tell Macbeth and Banquo their prophecies, both the characters and the audience are forced to wonder about fate. Is it real? Is action necessary to make it come to pass, or will the prophecy come true no matter what one does? Different characters answer these questions in different ways at different times, and the final answers are ambiguous—as fate always is.

Unlike Banquo, Macbeth acts: he kills Duncan. Macbeth tries to master fate, to make fate conform to exactly what he wants. But, of course, fate doesn't work that way. By trying to master fate once, Macbeth puts himself in the position of having to master fate always. At every instant, he has to struggle against those parts of the witches' prophecies that don't favor him. Ultimately, Macbeth becomes so obsessed with his fate that he

becomes delusional: he becomes unable to see the half-truths behind the witches' prophecies. By trying to master fate, he brings himself to ruin.

VIOLENCE

To call *Macbeth* a violent play is an understatement. It begins in battle, contains the murder of men, women, and children, and ends not just with a climactic siege but the suicide of Lady Macbeth and the beheading of its main character, Macbeth. In the process of all this bloodshed, *Macbeth* makes an important point about the nature of violence: every violent act, even those done for selfless reasons, seems to lead inevitably to the next. The violence through which Macbeth takes the throne, as Macbeth himself realizes, opens the way for others to try to take the throne for themselves through violence. So Macbeth must commit more violence, and more violence, until violence is all he has left. As Macbeth himself says after seeing Banquo's ghost, "blood will to blood." Violence leads to violence, a vicious cycle.

NATURE AND THE UNNATURAL

In medieval times, it was believed that the health of a country was directly related to the goodness and moral legitimacy of its king. If the King was good and just, then the nation would have good harvests and good weather. If there was political order, then there would be natural order. *Macbeth* shows this connection between the political and natural world: when Macbeth disrupts the social and political order by murdering Duncan and usurping the throne, nature goes haywire. Incredible storms rage, the earth tremors, animals go insane and eat each other. The unnatural events of the physical world emphasize the horror of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's acts, and mirrors the warping of their souls by ambition.

Also note the way that different characters talk about nature in the play. Duncan and Malcolm use nature metaphors when they speak of kingship—they see themselves as gardeners and want to make their realm grow and flower. In contrast, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth either try to hide from nature (wishing the stars would disappear) or to use nature to hide their cruel designs (being the serpent hiding beneath the innocent flower). The implication is that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, once they've given themselves to the extreme selfishness of ambition, have themselves become unnatural.

MANHOOD

Over and over again in *Macbeth*, characters discuss or debate about manhood: Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth when he decides not to kill Duncan, Banquo refuses to join Macbeth in his plot, Lady Macduff questions Macduff's decision to go to England, and on and on.

Through these challenges, *Macbeth* questions and examines manhood itself. Does a true man take what he wants no matter what it is, as Lady Macbeth believes? Or does a real man have the strength to restrain his desires, as Banquo believes? All of *Macbeth* can be seen as a struggle to answer this question about the nature and responsibilities of manhood.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

VISIONS AND HALLUCINATIONS

A number of times in *Macbeth*, Macbeth sees or hears strange things: the floating dagger, the voice that says he's murdering sleep, and Banquo's ghost. As Macbeth himself wonders about the dagger, are these sights and sounds supernatural visions or figments of his guilty imagination? The play contains no definitive answer, which is itself a kind of answer: they're both. Macbeth is a man at war with himself, his innate honor battling his ambition. Just as nature goes haywire when the normal natural order is ruptured, Macbeth's own mind does the same when it is forced to fight against itself.

BLOOD

Blood is always closely linked to violence, but over the course of *Macbeth* blood comes to symbolize something else: guilt. Death and killing happen in an instant, but blood remains, and stains. At the times when both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth feel most guilty, they despair that they will never be able to wash the blood—their guilt—from their hands.

SLEEP

When he murders Duncan, Macbeth thinks he hears a voice say "Macbeth does murder sleep" (2.2.34). Sleep symbolizes innocence, purity, and peace of mind, and in killing Duncan Macbeth actually *does* murder sleep: Lady Macbeth begins to sleepwalk, and Macbeth is haunted by his nightmares.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Macbeth* published in 2003.

Act 1, scene 1 Quotes

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Related Characters: Weird Sisters (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.1.12-13

Explanation and Analysis

In the play's opening scene, three witches gather in a storm and discuss their upcoming meeting with Macbeth. Together they chant these lines about the moral uncertainty and decay in Scotland.

That "fair is foul" means that what seems genuine is in fact evil, while "foul is fair" inversely means that what appears negative is actually positive. Thus the witches point out the fickle quality of appearances—a recurring theme throughout the tragedy—contending that foul and fair things can easily be mistaken for each other. This line is an example of the rhetorical device *chiasmus*: when elements of a text are arranged in the form ABBA. Here, "A" is "fair" and "B" is "foul." Chiasmus can have many different meanings depending on the circumstance, but here it gives a rhythmic quality to the text and points out a paradox between two terms.

The image of "fog and filthy air" similarly foreshadows how the senses will be muddled in the text, preventing characters from accurately perceiving what would be fair or foul. More generally, this image showcases how symbols and ethics will become mixed up in the tragedy. As supernatural creatures, the witches themselves seem decrepit and "foul" at times—but their prophecies are also accurate, which would make them "fair." Thus these lines do not only make a distinction between false appearance and honest reality, but rather question the very ability to determine the moral goodness of any such reality.

Act 1, scene 3 Quotes

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

Related Characters: Banquo (speaker), Macbeth, Weird Sisters

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.135-138

Explanation and Analysis

Macbeth and Banquo have just learned that Macbeth has become Thane of Cawdor, which confirms the first part of the witches' prophecy. In response, Banquo notes that the stories told by the witches may be attempts to manipulate Macbeth.

These lines pose an important question about the role of supernatural forces in this tragedy: Are the witches dictating these mens' destinies or do men maintain the ability to avoid or affect the prophecies being presented? When Banquo says they "win us to our harm," he contends that the witches are actively exploiting him and Macbeth, yet he also notes that they "tell us truths"—which would seem to imply that nothing they recount is false. The resolution comes in a similarly paradoxical phrase: "Honest trifles" that "betray." What Banquo means is that aspects of the witches' prophecies are genuine, but that those components are ultimately insignificant. He believes that these "instruments of darkness" will use the prophecies to gain control over him and Macbeth and then later manipulate them.

Banquo thus argues that he and Macbeth should resist believing the witches too much, even though they have thus far been correct in their prophecies. This belief posits a worldview in which humans *can* act freely from the influence of supernatural forces—choosing to believe them or not. Macbeth, on the other hand, represents the position that direct adherence to their prophecies will allow him to thwart his fate. Shakespeare thus uses these two characters mixed responses to present two different ways of viewing the supernatural forces in his work: as either maneuvering or merely recounting fate.

Act 1, scene 4 Quotes

Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.4.57-58

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing that Duncan will visit his castle, Macbeth finds

himself fantasizing about seizing power for himself. He wishes to obscure these evil thoughts from outside observers.

In these early moments in the play, Macbeth is still uncertain about how or whether to proceed with the murderous impulses that have arisen in him after hearing the witches prophecy. Though he ambitiously hopes to control the throne of Scotland, he also carefully watches these desires and seeks to hide them from others. Saying, "Stars, hide your fires" shows that Macbeth wishes to remain invisible and in complete darkness, such that his "black and deep desires" could not be observed. Metaphors of light and dark pervade this play, and here their meaning remains unclear: Darkness stands for Macbeth's moral unscrupulousness, but "light" is not quite the inverse of ethical goodness. Rather, "light" is represented as an active agent that can "see" into those desires; it stands for a supernatural or even holy force that scrutinizes man's actions.

Macbeth, then, seems to believe in the existence of a God-like figure who judges him for his thoughts, and from whom he wishes to hide. His concern is less that other human beings will spy his desires and more that it will be observed by supernatural forces—a point that confirms his allegiance to the witches' paranormal tendencies. Within this short image then, we have the underpinnings of Macbeth's striking guilt complex and the implication of a corresponding spiritual system, though the exact nature of that spirituality remains unclear.

Act 1, scene 5 Quotes

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts! unsex me here,
> And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
> Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,
> Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall.

Related Characters: Lady Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.5.47-55

Explanation and Analysis

After learning that King Duncan will remain at the castle for the evening, Lady Macbeth plots his demise. She asks for fortitude in renouncing any human compassion in order to best carry out the deed.

Much like Banquo, Lady Macbeth believes that supernatural forces have a corruptive effect on human nature. She believes they "tend on mortal thoughts" and will fill her with "direst cruelty." Yet whereas Banquo made this point in order to avoid those effects, Lady Macbeth fully embraces the depravity. Indeed, she uses a series of commands in order to demand being overtaken by them. The implication is that Lady Macbeth wishes to act entirely cruelly, but her natural human disposition will prevent her from doing so.

To make this point, Lady Macbeth focuses on images relating to female fertility and more generally to bodily functions. That she implores "unsex me here" indicates that she sees her gender as preventing her from carrying out her vile purpose; while "take my milk for gall" similarly involves a desire to give up something feminine nurturing (mother's milk) for something destructive and acidic (gall). Repeated references to the body further show her to be renouncing not only womanhood but humanity altogether—as if she desires to be a supernatural entity like the witches who could then act without moral scruples. In wishing to give up her humanity, this passage thus paradoxically affirms Lady Macbeth's sense that there is in fact an inherent goodness to human nature and specifically human biology. At the same time, it shows that humans see in the supernatural a corruptive route away from goodness—which they may flee (as Banquo does) or full-heartedly embrace.

> Look like the innocent flower,
> But be the serpent under it.

Related Characters: Lady Macbeth (speaker), Macbeth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.5.76-77

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Macbeth entreats her husband to kill Duncan that night. She recommends he act secretively and strike out violently.

These lines return the text to the theme of appearance versus reality. While Macbeth still remains uncertain about whether he wishes to deceive and kill Duncan, Lady

Macbeth is fully committed to the cruel idea. She thus sees duplicity as the best route to achieving her evil ends. She contrasts a passive image of "innocent flower" with the active corruption of "the serpent," much like the witches mixed up "fair" and "foul" in the tragedy's opening scene. For her, however, this distinction does not express a general predicament, but rather becomes a specific strategy to gain political power.

Referencing a serpent is also an allusion to the Biblical scene in the Garden of Eden, in which a snake tempts Eve and leads to humanity's expulsion from paradise. This Christian reference is especially evocative considering Lady Macbeth's engagement with supernatural paganism: just as she has summoned the aid of fiends, Lady Macbeth symbolically asks her husband to strike out against Christian ideals—to play the role of a Biblical villain.

Act 1, scene 7 Quotes

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.7.25-28

Explanation and Analysis

Macbeth ponders whether he should follow through on his plan to kill Duncan. He observes that he is being motivated by aspirations for power rather than responding to a specific injustice.

Shakespeare here makes a subtle point about two different reasons why one would be impelled act. The first is to have a "spur" or clear impetus for doing something, while the second is a more general "vaulting ambition." By describing the spur as something that can "prick the sides," Macbeth stresses how it is a narrow and specific stimulus; as a result it has a direct causal effect on his "intent." Ambition, on the other hand, tends to "o'erleap[] itself," meaning that it encourages one to act beyond his or her reasonable means. It overshoots a goal and as a result can have negative consequences.

What is intriguing about this passage is that Macbeth seems keenly aware of his motivations and limitations. Though he may be acting out of "vaulting ambition," he is not immediately convinced by that desire. He can critically assess what stimulates him to act, and its likely consequences. Yet, at the same, time he *will* ultimately ignore this skepticism and indeed "o'erleap" himself. Shakespeare thus gives a complex presentation of human psychology, in which people may introspectively note the flaws of their motivations, while still falling prey to those very flaws.

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more, is none.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.7.51-52

Explanation and Analysis

Having decided moments earlier against murdering Duncan, Macbeth finds his manhood challenged by his wife. In response, he argues that composure and allegiance are more characteristic of masculinity than rash violence.

His claim is made through somewhat indirect language. Using the term "dare" presents manhood as adventurous, even though Macbeth defines it through inaction rather than action. For he will only perform actions that "become a man"—a pun on "become" as meaning both to make one seem agreeable and to turn into. If one does "more," Macbeth reasons, he would not be a man, for he would have overstepped the boundaries of behaviors that define men and that make them attractive or worthy. In this way, Macbeth describes manhood as a limit on his actions instead of a justification for *more* action like Lady Macbeth.

This passage returns to the theme of gender identities. Recall that Lady Macbeth renounced her womanhood earlier in Act 1, Scene 5 in order to disavow empathy and heartlessly pursue her goal of power. Yet in the lines after Macbeth's quote here, she asks Macbeth to do just the opposite with his gender: to maintain and embrace it. This contrast shows that *she* sees manhood as equivalent to brute and rash action, whereas before that cruelty seemed to stem only from the supernatural or inhuman realm. Macbeth, however, unseats her opinion by defining manhood in terms of composure and calm intent. Shakespeare thus places the question of gender identity at the heart of this tragedy, presenting it as an ideological tool used by the characters to encourage each other to act more

or less aggressively.

Macbeth: If we should fail.
Lady Macbeth: We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.

Related Characters: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.7.68-71

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Macbeth continues to convince Macbeth that they should kill Duncan. When he wonders whether they will actually succeed, she argues that with sufficient fortitude they will certainly triumph.

The first two lines in this passage are halting and uncertain. Macbeth begins a hypothetical clause—"If we should fail"—but does not successfully finish it; while Lady Macbeth offers the similarly half-formed question "We fail?" In contrast to these fragmented construction, she opts for an aggressive command—"screw your courage"—and acerbic claim: "we'll not fail." Bravery and adherence to one's goals, in her opinion, will ensure success.

Their exchange insinuates two diverging views on human destiny: Whereas Macbeth attributes success to the whims of fates and prophecies, Lady Macbeth believes that humans themselves can select their own destiny. Her command "screw your courage to the sticking-place" implies that sufficient bravery will ensure success regardless of any external influence. Between these two characters, then, Shakespeare defines a spectrum of human relationships to destiny and personal agency—in which some attribute success to personal prowess while others see it as being out of one's own hands.

Act 2, scene 1 Quotes

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee;
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.1.44-53

Explanation and Analysis

After discussing the witches with Banquo, Macbeth is left alone to contemplate his impending murder. He then sees a dagger in the air and wonders to what extent it is real or hallucinated.

A primarily psychological analysis would see in these lines the first signs of Macbeth's insanity. His inability to distinguish between a physical and imaginary dagger does not prevent him from hoping to "clutch" either one. When he can't clutch it, he notes that it is impossible to "have" the vision and yet that he can still "see" it, and is confused why his sense of touch and vision seem to inexplicably not accord. Characteristically, Macbeth remains acutely aware of the conditions of his sanity, observing that his "heat-oppressed brain" may be responsible for creating the illusion. Yet after noting how his mind may be addled, he once more reiterates the "palpable" quality of the dagger, comparing it to his own physical sword.

Beyond introducing the idea that Macbeth may be acting out of madness, this passage develops the theme of appearance versus reality. Macbeth may be fixating on a false vision, but the vision actually reveals to him a truth—for it is a portent of the murder to come. In a sense, then, the "foul" vision is actually "fair" in that it is an accurate representation of reality. And when Macbeth does "draw" his own sword, he implies that even a hallucination may have a causal effect on his own actions. Shakespeare thus presents false visions not as figments of the imagination but as capable of inducing changes to reality itself.

Act 2, scene 2 Quotes

Methought I heard a voice cry, Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep, — the innocent sleep;
Sleep, that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.2.47-52

Explanation and Analysis

After murdering Duncan, Macbeth begins to feel remorse for what he has done. He fixates on a voice he claims to have overheard during the act, believing that it charges him with deep guilt.

We see here Macbeth's continued descent into the paranoid thinking characteristic of a murderer. His previous visual hallucinations are now accompanied by auditory ones, but instead of rationally ignoring them, he ruminates on how the illusion relates to his experience. Taking the line "Sleep no more!" Macbeth at first indicates a belief that it refers to Duncan whom he has murdered, that the words charge him with having killed a defenseless person while they were in "innocent sleep."

The text could easily have halted here, but the truly manic thinking comes in the ensuing images. Macbeth begins to focus obsessively on the abstract idea of sleep. He imagines it to be a weaver who "knits up" or makes coherent and composed "the ravell'd sleave of care"—in which a "ravell'd sleave" is a messy and disorganized garment. This metaphor presents sleep as a tranquil and organizing force that helps a person make coherent the chaos of life, that allows people to be coherent and calm. In the following lines, he casts sleep as the inverse or double to different types of daytime: the "death" after each "life"; the restful "bath" after one works; the "balm" to ease minds that may be overworked; a second sustenance after the meal of the day. These evocative images show how deeply Macbeth believes to have violated human life—for not only has he murdered Duncan but he has done so in an almost sacred space of sleeping rejuvenation. As Macbeth's obsessive thoughts on sleep proceed, an intimation exists too that "Sleep no more!" refers to the rampant guilt and madness that will descend now on Macbeth and his wife, in which because of their guilt, they will lose these healthful and necessary effects of sleep.

Act 3, scene 2 Quotes

Nought's had, all's spent
Where our desire is got without content.

Related Characters: Lady Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.6-7

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Macbeth ponders why she continues to be dissatisfied with her existence. She acknowledges that she has had complete success in her endeavors but somehow remains vexed.

These lines reveal a sharp change in Lady Macbeth's disposition. Whereas before, she believed completely that ambition (and the murder of Duncan) would generate positive results, here she concludes just the opposite. "Nought's had, all's spent" must be taken metaphorically—because Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have in fact achieved their goal of becoming king and queen—to refer to their contentment and emotional stability. But now she states that the trade-off of political power in exchange for "content," which we can take to mean "guilt-free contentment," wasn't at all worth it.

Beyond revealing a growing dissatisfaction in Lady Macbeth, this passage makes a broader claim on the trappings of power and fame. Lady Macbeth points out that the status she had pursued does not in fact grant her happiness, but rather has brought her into greater misfortune. Thus Shakespeare uses her psychological anxiety as a way to illustrate the self-defeating natures of avarice and desire.

Act 3, scene 4 Quotes

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.4.168-170

Explanation and Analysis

After seeing Banquo's ghost, Macbeth decides to return to consult the witches on his fate. He points out to his wife that he has pursued his murderous destiny too far to stop doing so now.

When Macbeth says, "I am in blood" he presents himself as entirely immersed in murder: Instead of causing blood to simply flow from others, he also feels the effects of that violent action – the blood he has spilled surrounds him. He

then clarifies that this is the result of having "Stepp'd in so far" into the metaphorical bloody pool; while "wade no more" signifies that he cannot stay afloat but will drown in the liquid. Thus Macbeth uses the metaphor of a pool of blood to articulate his own guilt and culpability: He believes that what he has done has inescapably sealed his fate and that trying to shift destinies at this point is pointless.

His choice of the word "tedious," however, complicates the passage somewhat. Instead of saying that "returning" is impossible or undesirable, he claims it is boring or insipid. This distinction seems to indicate that Macbeth *could* indeed change his bloody behavior and that he fails to do so simply out of apathy or inertia. In this way, he presents a somewhat more ambivalent version of fate's determinism: Destiny may very well have dictated his actions, but he could potentially shift them if he were more courageous.

Act 4, scene 1 Quotes

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

Related Characters: Weird Sisters (speaker), Macbeth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.44-45

Explanation and Analysis

The witches prepare for Macbeth's arrival by mixing an unnatural brew in the cauldron. During their incantation, one makes this pronouncement on impending evil.

These lines firstly verify the supernatural powers of the witches. They are able to sense from physical stimuli—"the pricking"—in their bodies that something "wicked" will take place in the future. Although the audience might be skeptical of the actual mystical powers the witches possess, this image confirms that they have at least a limited capacity to make sense of the future.

At the same time, by describing the wicked phenomenon as a separate external force — the phrasing of "this way comes" is a passive construction — the witches also present themselves as observers of fate, rather than active agents that bring certain events to pass. So while other human characters may see the witches as manipulative spirits willing bad events into existence, their actual incantations show them to be mere bystanders and oracles for fate. The witches comment describes Macbeth as the wicked one, implying that while their prophecy may have been accurate, it was Macbeth's wickedness that caused him to pursue it as he did (or perhaps that his choice to pursue it as he did has made him wicked).

Act 5, scene 1 Quotes

Out, damned spot! out, I say!

Related Characters: Lady Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.1.37

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Macbeth has taken to sleepwalking. One night, she wanders and rubs her hands while saying this line.

We see here the extent to which guilt has crippled Lady Macbeth and disrupted her ability to live a normal life. Saying this line while trying to wash her hands shows that while she earlier believed that she could simply wash her hands clear of Duncan's blood, that in fact she could not psychologically escape that blood at all. She obsessively repeats the action, believing that the "damned spot" that morally implicates her has refused to disappear. In this way, the play makes clear that the guilt that first caused Lady Macbeth to question her contentment has now caused her to enter a full-blown psychosis.

The text also returns to its ever-pressing concern of illusions and false appearances. Whereas Lady Macbeth was able to remove the physical blood from her hands after the murder, she remains unable to do away with its metaphorical counterpart. Much like Macbeth saw a hallucinatory knife before the murder, she visualizes non-existent blood after the deed has been completed. Although we might be likely to write these images off as false apparitions, one should also note the significance of their *psychological* reality. That is to say, although the "spot" is not palpable to anyone else, it is indeed a honest "fair" expression of Lady Macbeth's guilt. Shakespeare's work thus presents illusions as having their own kind of unique reality, a reality founded in the inner workings of the mind.

Act 5, scene 5 Quotes

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.5.22-31

Explanation and Analysis

As the final battle against Macduff's army approaches, Macbeth gives this moving soliloquy. He claims that life is an endless repetition and inherently meaningless.

To arrive at this nihilistic conclusion, Macbeth first ponders the succession of day after day. He notes how monotonous they are—a series of "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow"—to the extent that life never seems to significantly shift. If the future holds nothing novel, the past is similarly devoid of meaning—only ever bringing indications of "dusty death" to come. Instead of hoping to grasp closely life's fleeting existence, however, Macbeth commands it to depart as rapidly as possible with the phrase "Out, out, brief candle!" His ambitious and cruel nature has thus culminated in a complete rejection of the significance to life itself: at the apex of his success, life has become to him nothing but a series of haphazard noises and commotions with no underlying meaning.

Shakespeare brilliantly links this general pronouncement to the more specific case of reading and analyzing literature. Alliterating "petty pace" and repeating "day to day" reiterates how repeating patterns appear in language as well as in time; casting time to be made of "syllables" presents it as a construction of language. Presenting humans as "a poor player" and his environment as "the stage" similarly makes the experience of theater a metaphor for one's life in the world. Macbeth's "tale" becomes a symbol for the larger tale of human experience. Shakespeare makes a castigating self allusion with the phrase "told by an idiot," which shows that he has no greater access to truth or meaning than any of his readers. His text itself resists pure comprehension in that it is "sound and fury" alone—"signifying nothing" because no single meaning can be attributed to its characters or constructions. In this way, Shakespeare presents the finitude and emptiness of Macbeth's experience and the void of his language as a layered metaphor for each human's eventual demise.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

As a storm rages, three witches appear, speaking in rhyming, paradoxical couplets: "when the battle's lost and won" (1.1.4); "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.10). They agree to meet again on the heath (plain) when the battle now raging ends. There they'll meet Macbeth.

The witches' rhyming speech makes them seem inhuman, ominous, and paranormal, which, in fact, they are.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

At a military camp, King Duncan of Scotland, his sons Malcolm and Donalbain, and the Thane of Lennox wait for news of the war. A captain enters, covered in so much **blood** he is almost unrecognizable. The captain tells them of the state of the battle against the invading Norwegians and the Scottish rebels Macdonald and the Thane of Cawdor. Two Scottish nobleman have been especially brave, Macbeth (the Thane of Glamis) and Banquo. Macbeth killed Macdonald ("unseamed him from the nave to th' chops" (1.2.22)).

The blood covering the captain makes him an unrecognizable monster, just as Macbeth, who in this scene is described as a noble hero who is brave and loyal to his king, will be transformed into a monster as he becomes "covered" with the metaphorical blood of those he kills to achieve his ambitions.

The Thane of Ross arrives, and describes how Macbeth defeated Sweno, the Norwegian King, who now begs for a truce. Duncan proclaims that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor shall be put to death, and that Macbeth shall be made Thane of Cawdor.

Duncan rewards and trusts his subjects. This is the opposite of personal ambition. Ironically, though, he replaces one traitor with a much worse traitor.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

On the heath the witches appear. They call themselves the "weird sisters" (1.3.30) and brag of their dread and magical deeds such as killing swine and cursing a sailor to waste away.

The witches are established as both wicked and magically powerful.

Macbeth and Banquo enter. The witches hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and "king hereafter" (1.3.47). Banquo asks Macbeth why he seems to fear this good news, then questions the witches about his own future. They say that Banquo is "lesser than Macbeth and greater" (1.3.63) because though he'll never be king, his descendants will.

Does the fear Banquo notes in Macbeth signal that Macbeth's doomed struggle against his ambition starts the instant he hears the prophecy?

Macbeth asks how the witches know this information. But the witches vanish, making the two men wonder if they could have imagined the whole thing. Just then, Ross and Angus enter. They tell Macbeth that the old Thane of Cawdor was a traitor and that Duncan has made Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor.

The prophecy is fulfilled and the witches' power is proved to be genuine. The traitorous old Thane of Cawdor is replaced by Macbeth.

Macbeth and Banquo are shocked. Macbeth asks Banquo if he now thinks that his children will be king. Banquo seems unsure, and comments that "instruments of darkness" sometimes tell half truths to bring men to ruin.

Banquo guesses the witches' plot exactly. This means that when Macbeth chooses to believe the witches and act, he knows the risks.

As Banquo talks with Ross and Angus, Macbeth ponders the prophecy. If it's evil, why would it truly predict his being made Thane of Cawdor? If it's good, why would he already be contemplating murder, a thought that makes "my seated heart knock at my ribs" (1.3.134-136)? Macbeth feels that he's losing himself, and hopes that if fate says he'll become king, he won't have to act to make it happen.

Macbeth is already thinking about killing Duncan, but the thought terrifies him: he's struggling against his ambition. His thoughts about fate are classic: does fate happen no matter what, or must one act?

Ross and Angus think Macbeth's reverie is caused by becoming Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo agree to speak about the witches' prophecy later.

This exchange with Banquo is the last time Macbeth is honest in the play.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

At a camp near the battlefield, Malcolm tells Duncan that the old Thane of Cawdor confessed and repented before being executed. Duncan notes that you can't always trust a man by his outward show. Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus enter. Duncan says that even the gift of Cawdor is not as much as Macbeth deserves. Macbeth responds: "The service and loyalty I owe, in doing it, pays itself" (1.4.22).

Deeply ironic that just as Duncan comments about how you can't trust people's outward shows, Macbeth enters. Duncan's great strength as a king is his trust in his people and his thanes, but it also makes him vulnerable to treachery.

Duncan is pleased. He says: **"I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing"** (1.4.28-29). Next, he announces that Malcolm will be heir to the Scottish throne (the kingship was not hereditary in Scotland at that time). Duncan then adjourns the meeting and decides to spend the night at Inverness, Macbeth's castle.

Duncan thinks of his role as King in terms of what he can give. He's like a gardener in nature; putting his country above his own desires...

Macbeth goes ahead to prepare for the King's visit, but notes that Malcolm now stands between him and the throne. He begs the **stars to "hide your fires**, let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.51).

...Macbeth, in contrast, thinks in terms of what he can take. This makes his relationship with nature adversarial.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

At Inverness, Lady Macbeth reads a letter in which Macbeth tells her of the witches' prophecy. Lady Macbeth worries Macbeth is too kind and honorable to fulfill his ambition and the prophecy. She decides to question his manhood to make him act.

Lady Macbeth is established as power-hungry. She sees honor as a weakness, and knows how to push her husband's buttons: question his courage.

A servant enters with news that Duncan will spend the night, then exits. Lady Macbeth says Duncan's visit will be fatal, and calls on spirits to **"unsex me here... and take my milk for gall"** (1.5.39-46).

In order to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth not only renounces her womanhood, she literally asks to be turned into an unnatural fiend!

Macbeth enters, and says Duncan will spend the night and leave the next day. Lady Macbeth says Duncan will never see that day. She counsels Macbeth to look like an "innocent flower," but be the viper hiding beneath it (1.5.63). Macbeth remains unconvinced. Lady Macbeth tells him to leave the plan to her.

Macbeth is still struggling against his ambition. Lady Macbeth's advice on how to hide one's true intentions involves exploiting nature. (Note: in the Garden of Eden, the devil hid himself in the form of a snake.)

ACT 1, SCENE 6

Duncan, Malcolm, Donalbain, Banquo, Lennox, Macduff, Ross, and Angus arrive at Inverness. Duncan comments on the sweetness of the air. Banquo notes that martlets, a species of bird that usually nests in churches, have nested in the castle.

Ironic that Duncan thinks the castle where he'll be murdered is beautiful. Also shows what beauty Macbeth loses when he gives in to his ambition.

Lady Macbeth warmly greets the King and the thanes, though Macbeth is nowhere to be seen.

At this point, the planned murder weighs more on Macbeth than on Lady Macbeth.

ACT 1, SCENE 7

Macbeth, alone, agonizes about whether to kill Duncan. He'd be willing to murder Duncan if he thought that would be the end of it. But he knows that "bloody instructions, being taught, return to plague the inventor" (1.7.10). Also, Macbeth notes, Duncan is a guest, kinsmen, and good king. He decides ambition is not enough to justify the murder.

Macbeth wrestles with his ambition and wins! He knows that murdering Duncan will only end up leading to more bloodshed, and ruin his honor, which he prizes.

Lady Macbeth enters, asking where he's been. Macbeth tells her they won't murder Duncan. She questions his manhood. Macbeth replies: "I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is none" (1.7.46-47). But Lady Macbeth continues, mocking Macbeth's fickleness: she says she has loved and nursed a baby, but she would have sworn to "das[h] the [baby's] brains out" (1.7.56) if her oaths were as worthless as Macbeth's.

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth debate about manhood and courage. She says it's taking what you want. He says it's the power to put responsibility before selfishness, the power to not take what you want.

Macbeth asks what will happen if they fail. Lady Macbeth assures him they won't fail if they have courage. She outlines the plan: she'll give Duncan's bedroom attendants enough wine to ensure they black out from drunkenness. Then she and Macbeth will commit the murder and frame the attendants. Macbeth, impressed by her courage, agrees.

Lady Macbeth's tragedy is that she doesn't realize that murdering Duncan will torment and ultimately destroy her. Macbeth's tragedy is more profound: he does realize it, and still gives in to his ambition.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

It is after midnight in Inverness. Banquo talks with his son Fleance and notices the **stars aren't shining**. He prays for angels to "restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose" (2.1.7-8).

Banquo is also struggling against ambition. Earlier Macbeth begged the stars to hide (1.4.51). They have.

Macbeth enters. Banquo tells Macbeth his **sleep** has been troubled by dreams of the weird sisters. Macbeth claims never to think about them. But he suggests they talk about the witches soon, and adds that if Banquo supports him when the time comes he'll reward and honor Banquo for it.

Banquo is open about the troubling "dreams" the witches have inspired in him. Macbeth, who has decided to act on his own selfish ambition, is not.

Banquo says he'll be receptive to what Macbeth has to say provided he loses no honor in seeking to gain more. Banquo and Fleance head off to bed.

Banquo believes true manhood means acting honorably—just what Macbeth used to believe.

Alone, Macbeth sees a **bloody dagger** floating in the air. He can't grasp it, and can't decide whether it's a phantom or his imagination. **"Nature seems dead"** to him (2.1.50).

As Macbeth gets closer to the murder, nature starts to go haywire.

Offstage, Lady Macbeth rings the bell to signal that Duncan's attendants are asleep. Macbeth goes to murder Duncan.

Interesting that in Macbeth, most of the violence happens offstage.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Lady Macbeth waits in agitation for Macbeth to do the deed. She comments that had the sleeping Duncan not looked like her father she'd have killed him herself.

Lady Macbeth isn't completely cold-blooded, foreshadowing her future feelings of guilt.

Macbeth enters. He's killed Duncan. His hands are **bloodstained** and he's upset that when one of the attendants said "God bless us" in his sleep, he was unable to say "Amen." He also thought he heard a voice say "Macbeth does murder **sleep**" (2.2.34).

Bloodstained hands and sleeplessness: symbols of guilt. Macbeth is anguished: he knows the consequences of this murder.

Lady Macbeth soothes him and tells him to wash his hands, but notices he's still carrying the daggers he used to kill Duncan. Macbeth refuses to return to the scene of the crime. Lady Macbeth, furious, runs off to plant the daggers on the sleeping attendants.

Compare Macbeth's nervousness to Lady Macbeth's calm, collected behavior.

A knock sounds, terrifying Macbeth. He worries that not all the water in the world could wash the **blood** from his hands.

The knock at the door paralells the "knocking" of Macbeth's heart in scene 1.3.

Lady Macbeth returns, her **hands now as bloody** as Macbeth's. But she's calm, and identifies the 'mysterious' knocking as someone at the south entrance. She says: "a little water clears us of this deed" (2.2.65), and tells Macbeth to go and put his nightgown on so no one will suspect them.

Lady Macbeth is calm. She identifies the "mysterious" knocking as someone at the South entrance. But she is naïve, thinking water can wash away her guilt.

Macbeth wishes that the knocking could wake Duncan.

Macbeth shows remorse.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

A porter goes to the answer the door, joking to himself that he is the doorkeeper at the mouth of hell, and mocking whoever might be knocking to get into hell. At the door are Macduff and Lennox. Macduff good-naturedly asks what took so long. The porter blames drunkenness, and makes a series of jokes about alcohol and its effects on men.

The Porter provides a moment of ironic comedy. He imagines he's guarding hell, but with the murder of Duncan he really is guarding a hellish place.

Macbeth enters, pretending to have just woken up. Macduff asks if the King has woken yet: Duncan had asked to see Macduff early that morning. Macbeth points out where Duncan is sleeping, and Macduff goes off to wake him.

Introduction of Macduff, and contrast between Macbeth's lying and treachery with Macduff's openness and loyalty.

As they wait for Macduff to return, Lennox describes the terrible storm that raged the previous night and sounded like "strange screams of death" (2.3.52).

The unnatural act of killing Duncan has caused havoc in nature.

Macduff cries out in horror and runs onstage. Macbeth and Lennox ask what happened, then run to Duncan's chamber. Banquo, Malcolm, and Donalbain wake. Lady Macbeth enters, pretending not to know what happened, and expressing horror when Macduff tells her of the murder. Macbeth returns, and wishes he had died rather than have to see such a thing. Malcolm and Donalbain enter and ask what's happened. Lennox tells them that Duncan was murdered by his drunken attendants.

Everyone is being "natural" and honest in their grief except Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They are the snakes hiding behind the "innocent flower." Everything they do now must protect their secret. This secrecy becomes their defining trait, warping them.

Macbeth wishes aloud that he hadn't killed the attendants. When Macduff asks why Macbeth did kill the attendants, Macbeth says he was so furious that they had murdered the Duncan that he couldn't control himself. Lady Macbeth faints.

Macbeth killed the attendants to keep them quiet. Does Macduff suspect already? Lady Macbeth faints to head off further questioning.

The thanes agree to meet in the hall to discuss what's happened. Malcolm and Donalbain, though, remain behind. They realize that one of the thanes is probably the murderer and fear that they'll be the next targets. They decide to flee: Malcolm to England and Donalbain to Ireland.

Malcolm and Donalbain realize any one of the thanes could be faking his grief. The unnatural hides itself by looking natural.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Ross and an old man stand near Macbeth's castle. They discuss the unnatural portents just before and after Duncan's murder: darkness during the day, owls killing hawks, horses eating one another.

Further havoc in nature caused by the murder of Duncan and destruction of the natural order.

Macduff enters. He says it seems Duncan's attendants did commit the murder, and that because Malcolm and Donalbain fled they likely were behind the plot.

Macbeth's plot worked! If he could be a good and virtuous King, perhaps it will all turn out well…

Macduff then says Macbeth has been made king, and that he has already gone to Scone for the coronation. Ross heads to the coronation. But Macduff returns to his own castle at Fife.

…but does Macduff suspect him already? It isn't clear. But the paranoid Macbeth must think he does: violence creates fear which leads to violence.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

In the royal palace of Forres, Banquo states his suspicion that Macbeth fulfilled the witches' prophecy by foul play. But he notes that since the prophecy came true for Macbeth, perhaps it will come true for him as well.

Banquo suspects Macbeth, but it is his own ambition—the possibility that the prophecy might be true for him too—that occupies his mind.

Macbeth enters, with other thanes and Lady Macbeth. He asks Banquo to attend a feast that evening. Banquo says he will, but that meanwhile he has to ride somewhere on business. Macbeth asks if Fleance will be riding with him. Banquo says yes, then departs. Once he's alone, Macbeth sends a servant to summon two men. As he waits for them to arrive, he muses if the witches prophecy is true, then Banquo's descendants will be king, and he'll have murdered Duncan for nothing.

Macbeth wants to kill Banquo because he resents Banquo's honor and because the prophecy makes Banquo a threat. Also, Macbeth's guilt at murdering Duncan makes him want that murder to be "worthwhile." Macbeth's guilt about one crime pushes him to commit another.

The two men (identified in the stage directions as "murderers") enter. Macbeth tells them it's Banquo's fault they're poor, then questions their manhood for bearing such offenses. The murderers agree to kill Banquo and Fleance.

Macbeth uses the same methods to get the murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance that Lady Macbeth used against Macbeth: he questions their manhood.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

After sending a servant to fetch Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, waits, and muses that she has what she desires but isn't happy.

First indication that all is not well with Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth enters. She asks why he spends so much time alone. Macbeth responds: "We have scorched the snake, not killed it" (3.2.15). He fears someone might try to kill him as he killed Duncan, and seems envious of Duncan's **"sleep"** (3.2.25).

In order to keep power built by violence, more violence is always needed. Macbeth knew this would happen; he's caught in the vicious cycle of violence...

Lady Macbeth reminds him to be "bright and jovial" at the feast. Macbeth tells her to act the same. But then Macbeth moans, "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (3.2.37) because Banquo and Fleance are still alive.

...and that vicious cycle begins to take a psychological toll on Macbeth.

Macbeth says that before the night is through there shall be a "deed of dreadful note" (3.2.45), but adds that she's better off being innocent until she can applaud what has happened.

Macbeth tries to protect Lady Macbeth: traditional male-female roles.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

The two murderers lie in wait a mile from the royal castle. A third murderer joins them, sent by Macbeth.

The Third Murderer is an unsolved mystery. No critics know who he is or why he's there.

Banquo and Fleance enter. The murderers attack. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. The murderers return to the castle to tell Macbeth what's happened.

Macbeth's effort to control fate seals his doom. Fleance lives and Banquo's death makes the Thanes suspicious.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Macbeth bids all the lords welcome to the feast. Just at that moment, he notices that one of the murderers is standing at the door. The murderer tells Macbeth that Banquo is dead but Fleance escaped. Macbeth comforts himself that Fleance will not be a threat for quite some time.

Macbeth learns that his first attempt to control fate has failed.

Lady Macbeth calls to Macbeth and asks him to return to the feast and sit. But Macbeth doesn't see an empty seat at the table. When Lennox gestures at a seat, saying it's empty, Macbeth sees **Banquo's ghost** sitting there. Macbeth alone can see the ghost. He astonishes the thanes by shouting at the empty chair.

Is Banquo's ghost real or a figment of Macbeth's guilty mind? The uncertainty emphasizes that Macbeth's fate is part of him, caused by his character: his ambition and guilt.

Lady Macbeth tells the thanes not to worry, that since childhood Macbeth has suffered fits. She pulls Macbeth aside and once again questions his manhood. The ghost disappears. Macbeth rambles about murders and spirits risen from the grave until Lady Macbeth reminds him of his guests. He echoes her story about his fits, then leads a toast to the missing Banquo.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth continue to try to lie to keep their secrets and hold on power, but these lies become less and less effective as guilt about the violence they have committed begins to affect them.

The **ghost reappears** and Macbeth, terrified, starts shouting at it. Lady Macbeth tries to play down her husband's strange behavior. The ghost again disappears. Macbeth is amazed that everyone could be so calm in the face of such sights. When Ross asks what sights, Lady Macbeth steps in and asks the guests to leave at once. The thanes exit.

Macbeth has become so warped he cannot tell the unnatural from the natural anymore. Lady Macbeth sees lying is useless and chooses isolation: she tells the thanes to leave.

Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth: **"Blood will have blood"** (3.4.121), and asks what Lady Macbeth makes of the fact that Macduff does not appear at the royal court. He decides to visit the weird sisters to find out more about his fate.

Macbeth's desperation to keep power motivates him to visit the weird sisters. He has sacrificed everything for his ambition…

He says: "I am in **blood** / Stepped in so far" (3.4.135) that turning back is as difficult as continuing on.

… now ambition and violence are all he has left, and he knows it.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

The weird sisters meet with Hecate, the goddess of witches. She rebukes the sisters for meddling with Macbeth without first consulting her. But she says she'll help them when Macbeth comes to see them tomorrow. She says that they'll show him visions that will give him confidence and "draw him to his confusion" (3.5.29).

Many productions of Macbeth cut this scene. It introduces Hecate, and establishes that the witches truly are out to get Macbeth. Many productions of the play prefer to keep the witches' motivations more vague.

ACT 3, SCENE 6

Lennox and another lord talk sarcastically about Macbeth and the too great similarities between the murders of Duncan and Banquo, with Donalbain and Malcolm accused of the first and Fleance blamed for the second.

Macbeth's murder of Banquo, committed to control his fate, has had the opposite effects. Now the thanes see Macbeth for what he is: a tyrant.

Macduff, the lord says, has gone to England to meet with Malcolm and try to get the English King Edward and his lords to gather an army to help them defeat Macbeth. The rumor is that Macbeth sent a messenger to Macduff. Macduff rebuffed the messenger, who turned his back as if to say that Macduff would pay for that decision.

Compare Macduff and Macbeth: Macbeth will do anything for personal power; Macduff will do anything to save his country.

Both men hope Macduff remains safe and soon returns with the armies of Malcolm and England to free Scotland from Macbeth.

Ambition has made Macbeth a violent tyrant who holds the throne only through fear.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

In a cavern, the weird sisters throw awful ingredients such as "eye of newt and toe of frog" (4.1.14) into a cauldron full of a boiling brew. Hecate arrives, and all dance and sing. One witch cries out "Something wicked this way comes" (4.1.62): Macbeth enters. He commands the witches to answer his questions.

There is a resemblance between Macbeth and the witches now. All are wicked, all are unnatural.

The witches conjure up three apparitions. First, a floating head appears and tells Macbeth to beware Macduff.

The head symbolizes either Macduff's rebellion or Macbeth's fate.

Next, a bloody child appears. The child says that "no man of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.95-96).

The bloody child symbolizes Macduff's birth by caesarian section.

Finally, a child wearing a crown and holding a tree appears. It says that Macbeth will not be defeated until Great Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth is pleased: since forests don't march, he must be invincible!

The child with crown and tree symbolizes Malcolm.

Macbeth wants to know one more thing: will Banquo's heirs have the throne? The witches perform a final conjuring. Eight kings appear walking in a line, the eighth holding a mirror, and all of them followed by Banquo's ghost. Macbeth, furious at this sign that Banquo's heirs will get the throne, demands answers. But Hecate mocks him and the witches vanish.

The king holding the mirror symbolizes King James who ruled England when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, and whose family traced its ancestry back to Banquo.

Lennox enters. He brings word that Macduff has fled to England. In an aside, Macbeth scolds himself for failing to kill Macduff when he wanted to earlier. He vows in the future to act on every impulse, and decides to attack Macduff's castle and kill anyone connected to him: servants, wife, and children.

Ambition and fear have pushed Macbeth that final step: he is no longer targeting just his political enemies, but also their innocent families. Macbeth is now truly a monster.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

At Fife (Macduff's castle), Lady Macduff is angry. She demands to know why Macduff has gone to England, leaving her behind. She thinks Macduff is a coward. Ross says Macduff's flight could be the result of wisdom, not fear.

Another debate about manhood. Does a real man sacrifice the safety of his family for the good of his country?

After Ross leaves, Lady Macduff turns to her son. She tells the boy that his father is dead. The boy doesn't believe her, but asks if his father is a traitor. Lady Macduff says yes, Macduff is a traitor: a man who swore an oath and broke it and now must hang. The boy thinks if traitors allow themselves to be hanged they must be fools, since there are undoubtedly more traitors than honest men in the world.

Macduff's son is wise beyond his years, noting that those who put themselves above society far outnumber those who put the common good above their own selfish ambitions.

A servant bursts in to warn of coming danger, then rushes out. Before Lady Macduff or her children can run, murderers enter the chamber, stab Macduff's son, and chase Lady Macduff offstage.

Macbeth has ordered the murder of the innocent. His loss of humanity is complete, and the seeds of his self-destruction are sown.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

In England, near the palace of King Edward, Macduff urges Malcolm to quickly raise an army against Macbeth. But Malcolm says Macduff might actually be working for Macbeth, a suspicion heightened by the fact that Macduff left his family behind and unprotected in Scotland.

Why does Macduff leave his family behind when he goes to England? Does he underestimate Macbeth's depravity, or has he put too much emphasis on country at the expense of family?

Malcolm then adds that he delays attacking Macbeth because he fears that he himself would perhaps be even a worse ruler. Malcolm describes himself as so lustful, vicious, and greedy that he makes Macbeth look kind. Macduff cries out in horror, and says he will leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Malcolm then reveals that none of his self-description was true: it was a trick to test Macduff's loyalty. Malcolm now believes that Macduff is loyal to Scotland and not Macbeth, and that he has an army of ten thousand men commanded by the English Lord Siward, ready to invade Scotland.

Macduff proves that his morality and love of country is greater than his ambition.

Just then an English doctor enters. Malcolm speaks with the doctor, then tells Macduff that King Edward of England is so saintly that he can cure disease.

In contrast to Macbeth, Edward is so virtuous his touch restores order to nature: it heals.

Ross enters. He tells Malcolm that if he invaded the Scottish people would line up to join his army against Macbeth. Finally, Ross tells Macduff his family has been murdered. Macduff cries out in anguish. Malcolm tells him to fight it like a man. Macduff responds that he must also "feel it like a man" (4.3.223). But they agree that Macduff's anger and grief should be used to fuel his revenge.

True manhood, Macduff realizes in his moment of anguish, involves not just strength, honor, and loyalty, but also emotion, feeling, and love.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

It is night in Macbeth's castle of Dunsinane. A doctor and a gentlewoman wait. The gentlewoman called the doctor because she has seen Lady Macbeth **sleepwalking** the last few nights, but she refuses to say what Lady Macbeth says or does.

When he killed Duncan, Macbeth thought he heard a voice say he had murdered sleep. Well, he did: Lady Macbeth's sleep.

Lady Macbeth enters, holding a candle, but asleep. Lady Macbeth keeps **rubbing her hands as if to wash them** while saying "out, damned spot" (5.1.30). Then Lady Macbeth seems to relive her attempt to convince Macbeth to kill Duncan, concluding with the words: "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much **blood** in him" (5.1.33-34)?

Lady Macbeth, who once naively thought she could just wash her hands and forget Duncan's murder, is now sleepwalking and so full of guilt that she imagines her hands are always covered in blood.

The horrified doctor and gentlewoman watch as Lady Macbeth then relives conversations with Macbeth after the murder of Banquo and hears an imaginary knocking and rushes off to bed. The doctor says the disease is beyond his power to cure, and that "unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1.61-62). He also says he dares not speak about what he's just witnessed.

Lady Macbeth's guilt makes it impossible for her to hide the horrors that she and Macbeth have committed. Her conscience is rebelling against the unnatural fiend that ambition has turned her into.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Lennox and other Scottish lords and soldiers discuss the situation: Malcolm and his army are at Birnam Wood. Macbeth, in a constant rage verging on madness, is fortifying the stronghold of Dunsinane.

With the mention of Birnam Wood and Dunsinane, the audience can see that Macbeth's fate is approaching.

The lords agree that Macbeth is tormented by his terrible actions, and that those who follow him do so out of fear, not love. The lords ride to join Malcolm.

Macbeth's efforts to maintain power through violence have, in fact, turned people against him and made him weak.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Macbeth dismisses all reports about Malcolm's army, saying he'll fear nothing until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane and mocking Malcolm as a man born of woman. He shouts for his servant Seyton to bring his armor, then muses how sick at heart he feels, how withered his life has become.

Macbeth is fearless because of the prophecies, but he seems to wish he weren't. He knows his life is awful, but he's so gripped by ambition that he can't turn back.

He asks the doctor about Lady Macbeth, then commands that the man cure her. In an aside, the doctor says that if he could escape Dunsinane, no fee of any size could bring him back.

Macbeth seems totally out of touch with reality. He is a man warped beyond any semblance of humanity.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

In Birnam Wood, Malcolm walks with Macduff, Siward, Young Siward, and others Scottish and English lords. Malcolm gives orders that to hide the size of their army, all soldiers should cut a branch from a tree and hold it upright as they march.

The first block in Macbeth's fate falls into place: Birnam Wood will march on Dunsinane.

ACT 5, SCENE 5

Macbeth laughs at the coming army, but seems bored by his lack of fear. Suddenly, a woman cries out. Seyton investigates, and returns with news that Lady Macbeth has died. Macbeth gives a speech about life: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day," concluding that life "is a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / signifying nothing" (5.5.18-27).

Macbeth has become so numb because of his own terrible actions that he can't even react when his wife dies. All he can do is comment on how meaningless life is.

A servant rushes in with news that Birnam Wood is marching toward Dunsinane. Macbeth rushes to see for himself, and realizes the witches tricked him. He feels fear for the first time, calls to raise the alarm, and says that at least he'll die fighting.

The prophecy gives Macbeth courage, but also makes his life empty. He almost seems to look forward to dying.

ACT 5, SCENE 6

Malcolm orders his men to throw down the branches they carry. The first charge against Dunsinane commences under Siward and Macduff.

The very quick and sudden scenes in the second half of Act 5 capture the chaos of battle.

ACT 5, SCENE 7

In the fighting, Macbeth encounters and fights Young Siward. Though Young Siward is brave, Macbeth quickly kills him and says in a mocking tone that he fears no man of woman born.

A reminder of the second half of the prophecy protecting Macbeth.

ACT 5, SCENE 8

Macduff searches for Macbeth, vowing to kill him to avenge his family.

Emphasis on Macduff's need for revenge against Macbeth. The play is building suspense.

ACT 5, SCENE 9

Malcolm and Siward meet. They have easily captured the castle because Macbeth's men barely fight back.

Macbeth's men don't even fight for him. His rule is utterly hollow.

ACT 5, SCENE 10

Macbeth and Macduff meet. Macbeth says he has avoided fighting Macduff because he has too much blood on his hands already.

It's unclear if Macbeth is being honest or if he's baiting Macduff.

They fight. Macbeth mocks Macduff, saying his effort is wasted: no one of woman born can beat Macbeth. But Macduff replies that he was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb" (5.10.16).

The second block of Macbeth's fate slides into place.

Macbeth, suddenly fearful now that the prophecy has turned against him, refuses to fight him. But Macduff calls Macbeth a coward and says that Macbeth will be mocked across Scotland if he surrenders. Despite certain death, Macbeth attacks. Macduff kills him.

Macbeth dies as he lived—a slave to ambition. Lady Macbeth convinced him to sacrifice his honor by questioning his courage, now Macduff gets Macbeth to fight for a lost cause to prove his courage.

ACT 5, SCENE 11

Malcolm, Siward, Ross, and others enter. Ross tells Siward of Young Siward's death. Siward asks if his son died from wounds on the front or back. Ross replies the front. Siward is content, denying Malcolm's comment that his son is worth more mourning than that.

Siward is an ambiguous part of an otherwise happy ending. Siward prizes strength and courage above all things, even love for his family. Might he one day become another Macbeth?

Macduff enters, carrying Macbeth's severed head. He proclaims Malcolm to be King of Scotland and swears his loyalty.

Macduff shows his loyalty to King and country.

Malcolm accepts the thanes' loyalty and makes them all earls (a higher rank). He pledges to "plant" a new peace, and to heal the wounds Macbeth and his "fiend-like queen" (5.11.35) inflicted on Scotland.

Malcolm returns Scotland to political order, as his use of nature metaphors shows. Malcolm wants to make his country great, not himself.

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